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Book Reviews

A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms.

By CHARLES AUGUSTUS BRIGGS, D.D., D.Litt., Professor of Theological Encyclopedia and Symbolics, Union Theological Seminary, New York, and EMILIE GRACE BRIGGS, B.D. New York: Scribners, 1906. 2 vols. Pp. cx+422 and 572. \$6.

This work is the latest issue in the International Critical Commentary, and it is one of the best. It is a pleasure to be able to say positively at the start that to the student of the Psalter these volumes are indispensable; for there is a treasury of well-arranged material here greater by far than in any other commentary on the Psalms.

The author in chief says in his preface that he could not have prepared these books without Miss Briggs's aid, and therefore he has done justice to his accomplished daughter by putting her name on the title-page. There is never a mark to distinguish the work of parent or child and no keenness in analysis will enable the reader to supply the omission. But the most casual reading will discover that here was work enough for two and the most searching criticism will lay bare honor enough for two.

As one turns over these pages one is first impressed by the vast amount of labor expended in their preparation. One who has not made a try at this kind of task cannot realize how many hours may be devoted to a study which occupies but an inconspicuous place in the final result. It goes without very much saying that labor alone, however severe, could not guarantee a good product. There must have been an intelligent direction of the effort, and an underlying long period of preliminary training. No very young scholar, however gifted, could have written these books. The author scarcely needed to say that he was forty years gathering the material for this work. The wealth of reference and illustration here displayed could not be the hasty collection of the moment, even with the aid of a trained collaborator, but must be the accumulated stores of many years of research.

Another feature quickly apparent and decidedly less welcome is the large use of abbreviations. Many of these are self-evident to the biblical scholar, but other readers will be compelled either to miss the significance of a reference or be ever turning back to the key, a procedure which becomes rather annoying. The temptation to save space for larger uses is very

great, but it may be that there is a tendency to overdo the use of unintelligible symbols. We come across WL for example, but the key must be consulted to discover that it means the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament.

To pass from general to specific matters, we note that Dr. Briggs has not drifted from his moorings in regard to the date of the various psalms. It has been frequently put forth as an established result of criticism that not only are there no Davidic psalms, but also none that can be assigned to the pre-exilic period. But Dr. Briggs holds that seven may be assigned to the early monarchy, seven to the middle monarchy, and thirteen to the late monarchy, i. e., twenty-seven to the pre-exilic period. It may be added that he puts but thirteen in the Exile, thirty-three are credited to the early Persian period, sixteen to the times of Nehemiah, and eleven to the late Persian period. The remainder, just one-third of the total number, fall in the Greek period, a small number of which are as late as the Maccabean age. This result is very conveniently set forth in the text and also in an admirably arranged table (Introduction, pp. xc f.).

Moreover, of the early poems, Dr. Briggs thinks that some may be Davidic. Ps. 7, for example, when reduced to its original form, contains nothing inconsistent with the tradition that David wrote it when he was hard pressed by Saul and his Benjamite warriors. At the same time we are warned (p. lxi) that the title "to David" was never intended to refer to authorship. There was once a collection of psalms under the title "David," appropriate because that hero was the traditional father of religious poetry and of the temple worship. When this collection was merged in the larger body, "to David" was prefixed to each poem to show its source.

From the point of view of recent criticism this result on the whole is quite conservative. Further, it appears that our author leaves no psalm undated, at least so far as period is concerned. He is not content in any case until he has found a place in the history for poems which do not have any close ties to earth. To many biblical students the dating of psalms seems one of the most difficult problems in Old Testament study, and as a matter of fact it is so; and therefore the more cautious scholar will frequently confess his inability to reach a definite result.

We may admire Dr. Briggs's confidence, but there are many cases where it will not prove convincing. Take as a good illustration, Ps. 45. In ecclesiastical offices, from a quite erroneous interpretation, this psalm is appointed for Christmas Day: a most unfortunate choice, for the poem is evidently a nuptial hymn, a conclusion established by the contents and by

the oldest part of the title, "a song of love." It celebrates a royal wedding; and hence in the Gregorian use is appointed for the Annunciation. The marriage is not that of the messianic king, for the royal spouse is a man of flesh and blood. So far there is general agreement; but the human mind is unsatisfied until it takes another step and presses the query: What royal wedding is so finely sung? Dr. Briggs says with great positiveness that the psalm is a commemoration of the marriage of King Jehu, who under Elisha's inspiration overthrew the dynasty of Omri. The linguistic peculiarities he explains as North Israelitish rather than late Aramean. He finds in the poem many striking allusions to the period of the famous revolutionist. Professor Paul Haupt on the other hand with equal conviction follows Olshausen and asserts that it is a nuptial song presented by the Jewish high-priest, the Maccabean Jonathan, at the wedding of the Syrian king, Alexander Balas, and the Egyptian princess, Cleopatra, 150 B. C. (*Biblical Love-Ditties*, p. 10). The psalm has also been referred to Solomon, Joram, Ahab, Aristobulus I, and to a Persian monarch. It must appear therefore that scholars are wiser in saying with Duhm that it is not possible to determine the king whose marriage is thus celebrated.

In this work there is no lack of sympathy with the subject. One who did not love the Psalms could scarcely write an adequate commentary upon them. The author shows everywhere his strong feeling for the Psalter, regarding it as plainly the greatest production in the Old Testament. Possibly this prejudice in favor of his subject has led to the obscuration of some of the defects in the great collection of religious poems. Duhm says that Ps. 119 is "the emptiest production which has ever made paper black" (*Die Psalmen, in loc.*). But Dr. Briggs says "the Psalmist is far in advance of the priestly attitude of P;" that he is "an early Pharisee of the highest and noblest type." He is portrayed as loyal to the law in the face of trouble, affliction, and bitter persecution.

The imprecatory psalms are now pretty generally regarded as heavy weights to the doctrine of inspiration and quite unsuited to Christian use. But our author notes that this vindictive element is less conspicuous in the Psalter than in the law and prophets. He says further that the modern objection to the imprecations is due to two errors, both to the disadvantage of the moderns. The first error is the discrimination between the religion of the individual and that of the nation; and the second is the discrimination between both of these and the ideal religion of mankind. He notes that our Lord pronounced woes upon the scribes and Pharisees because they were obstructors of the kingdom of God, and the divine anger is manifest against all individualistic enemies of the true religion: "it is a weak and

sickly individualism which shuts its eyes against the wrath of God, and of the Lamb, and of the church, against evil and incorrigible sin." He concludes that "in substance the imprecations in the Psalter are normal and valid," it is only in form and mode of expression that "they belong to an age of religion which has been displaced by Christianity."

The most original contribution in this work is the treatment of the Psalms from the point of view of poetical structure. The author takes just satisfaction in having been one of the earliest and most consistent of contemporary scholars to insist upon the wide use of meter in biblical criticism and interpretation. He finds in the Psalms four clearly marked measures. The trimeter, in which meter there are no less than eighty-nine psalms, that is, three-fifths of the whole; the tetrameter, found in twenty psalms; the pentameter, which measure accounts for twenty-five psalms; and the hexameter, discoverable in the same number. That makes a grand total of 159, but the explanation is found in the combination of two distinct psalms into one; e. g., Ps. 55:2, 3, 5-8 is a trimeter, but vs. 10-16, 21 f., 24, constitute a pentameter. Besides these there are some poems of varying measure, as Pss. 23 and 45. Then again Dr. Briggs contends that the Psalms "were arranged in regular strophical organization." He finds poems of single strophes, with a pair of strophes, with three, five, seven, and eleven, and even of twenty-two strophes. Further, the strophes vary greatly in the number of lines, strophes being found with two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, twelve, and fourteen lines. The tetrastich is the most common, occurring in sixty-two poems, while there is but one nonastich (42, 43). Now all this may seem very technical and unimportant, but as a matter of fact it is a key to Dr. Briggs's textual criticism, which is of most far-reaching character.

For this poetical structure does not always appear in the Psalter as it stands. That condition is explained by textual corruption, glossation, and adaptation. The original poems were all in the regular poetic form, as regards measure, strophe, and lines, but they have been revised, enlarged, and combined for liturgical purposes and for other reasons, thus obscuring the primitive form. Dr. Briggs has applied this poetical system consistently and logically and has been undaunted by the occasional surprising results. Whatever we find in the text now must be reduced to a suitable poetical structure. The translations which stand at the head of the treatment of each psalm are not those of the Massoretic text, but of the original poems stripped of all later accretions. Sometimes these results are pretty radical, but occasionally are unexpectedly conservative. An instance of the latter kind is Ps. 51. The bulk of that poem is plainly antisacrificial, a sentiment

flatly contradicted in the closing part. Hence the last two verses are generally regarded as a priestly appendix written with a polemic interest. In the Revised Version, both American and English, a space separates these verses from the rest of the psalm. But Dr. Briggs will have none of this. He insists that the poem is a unit, a penitential prayer of the time of Nehemiah, the author being a companion of the great cup-bearer in his efforts to give the city walls. The reason for insisting on the unity is that the last two verses are necessary to the completion of the strophe, the poem containing then four strophes of ten lines each. The apparent contradiction is cleared up in part by eliminating "of God" in vs. 16 as an explanatory gloss, and in part by denying an antithesis to the ritual sacrifices.

In Ps. 81 our author finds two strophes of five trimeter lines, and four strophes of four similar measures. To get this result, parts of vss. 8, 9, and all of 11, 16, 17, are deemed glosses. The parts left, having a different strophical arrangement, are adjudged to be separate poems; one a call to the celebration of the Passover, the other a paraphrase of the divine words to Israel at the time of the Exodus. Again Ps. 123 consisted originally of a single hexameter strophe of four lines, vss. 1, 2, and belonged to the Greek period. To this was added in Maccabean times a trimeter pentastich, vss. 3, 4. The inconsistencies here, it is claimed, are found in the subject-matter as well as in poetic structure.

Such cases might be indefinitely multiplied, but enough have been cited to show how remorselessly the system is followed. The results reached in this way are the most questionable of any of the contributions in this book, and, suggestive as they often are, have the least chance of gaining acceptance. Fortunately the doubt about the validity of this method does not involve doubt as to the value of these volumes as a whole. In the introduction, in the exegesis, and in the critical notes, there is a wealth of learning not to be lost from sight, even though one may think the Hebrew poets to have exercised considerable more license in form than they are credited with by this distinguished critic.

For a work so full of pitfalls for compositor and proofreader there seem to be singularly few errors. The omission of Ps. 127 in the list of Solomonic Psalms (p. lxvii) is noted, also the repeated misprint Kedah for Kedar (Vol. II, pp. 444 f.). The indices contain a full list of Hebrew words discussed, an important and thus readily accessible lexicographical contribution, a list of persons and of subjects, but not, as we think unfortunately, of the texts from other books of the Old Testament upon which an incidental light is shed.

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NEW YORK CITY